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### Review of Richard Lansdown, ed., Lord Byron

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*Byron's Letters and Journals: A New Selection*, ed. by Richard Lansdown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), xxxi+518pp. £30.

Byron was one of the English language's great letter writers. His chatty, unbuttoned and often hilarious letters are vastly entertaining and deserve to be read alongside his poems as creative works in their own right. Byron expertly tailored his letters to their recipients, giving each of them a slightly different version not only of events but also of himself. His correspondents tended to save his letters, and around 3000 of them have survived. From time to time Byron also kept journals: in London in 1813-14, in the Alps in 1816 and again in Ravenna in 1821 and in Cephalonia in 1824. These private documents, written for himself or (in 1816) for his half-sister, contain highly personal records of his opinions and his emotional state at important moments in his life: his years of fame, his traumatic departure from England, his settling into expatriate life in Italy, and his involvement in the Greek struggle for independence.

The letters are full of biographical insights and information, while also being improvisational rhetorical performances of great skill. A series of letters to Lady Melbourne in 1813-15, for example, reads like a slightly disreputable epistolary novel, with Byron cast in the role of a libertine from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. In almost daily bulletins, Byron keeps Lady Melbourne informed about his attempts to disentangle himself from Caroline Lamb, his awkward courtship of Annabella Milbanke and his abortive seduction of Lady Frances Webster (sometimes all three in the same letter). These letters are carefully crafted pieces of writing that stage Byron's sexual conquests and their complications for his correspondent, even as they are also revealing.

Almost a quarter of Byron's surviving letters were written to his publisher John Murray, who frequently read passages aloud from them to visiting friends. These letters provide an invaluable record of the business relationship between the poet and his publisher, as the two of them collaborated to create an unprecedented string of poetic best sellers. But they also show that the two men had much more than a business relationship. Byron could sometimes treat Murray high-handedly as a social inferior; Murray, in turn, could sometimes fawn on and flatter his noble author. But Murray also provided Byron with an understanding ear and an important link to the world he had left behind in 1816, and Byron sent Murray reports of Italian life, opinions about contemporary literature, and friendly, newsy letters.

Unlike, say, Keats or Coleridge, Byron wasn't much given to theorizing about poetry in his letters. But they are still very revealing about his poetic ideas and practice. In 1817 he writes (in a letter not included in this selection) that '[w]ith regard to poetry in general I am convinced the more I think of it – that [...] all of us – Scott – Southey – Wordsworth – Moore – Campbell – I – are all in the wrong – one as much as another – that we are upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system – or systems – not worth a damn in itself – & from which none but Rogers and Crabbe are free – and that the present & next generations will finally be of this opinion'. These kind of statements can usefully be read alongside his poetry and his more formal, public defence of Pope's verse.

As Byron's poetry developed towards the conversational, comic voice of *Don Juan*, moreover, his poetic voice and his epistolary voice increasingly converged. This becomes clearly visible in December 1820, when the military commandant Del Pinto was shot in the street outside Byron's house. Byron had Del Pinto carried into the house and sent for doctors, but it was too late. Almost immediately afterwards – apparently with the soldier's body still lying in the house and before anyone had informed his widow – Byron sat down and wrote a letter about the event to Thomas Moore. Over the next few days, he recounted the assassination again in letters to John Murray, Lady Byron and Augusta Leigh. Then he wrote it into Canto Five of *Don Juan*. Many words and whole phrases from the letters were incorporated into the poem verbatim, as though the letters were rough drafts for the poem.

Given Byron's fame, it's not surprising that his letters didn't take long to find their way into print. Thomas Moore printed 561 letters (some in expurgated forms) in his *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron, with Notices of his Life* (1830-1831), Roland E. Prothero printed 1198 letters in the 1899-1904 edition of Byron's poetry and letters, and Leslie Marchand published a complete edition of the letters and journals in 1973-1982, with a supplementary volume in 1994. More letters have surfaced since then. A paperback selected edition by Marchand appeared in 1982, but this has long been out of print. There are selections from the letters in the Oxford World's Classics edition of the *Major Works* (ed. McGann), in the Norton Critical Edition (ed. Levine) and in some classroom anthologies. But this is the first selected edition of the letters to appear since Marchand's.

The title page indicates that this selection comes 'From Leslie A. Marchand's twelve-volume edition' (the supplementary volume brings the total to thirteen). Rather than re-editing the letters from manuscripts, where available, Richard Lansdown has chosen to reprint the text from Marchand's edition. His note on the text says that he 'basically follows its editorial principles in their entirety, too.' The text presented here, then, is only as good as Marchand's. This is a shame, because in recent years a number of concerns have been voiced about Marchand's edition, whose first volumes appeared more than forty years ago. Marchand often faced trade-offs between producing a text that was easy to read and one that was an accurate transcription of the manuscript. Marchand does not transcribe addresses. He gives no information about the paper on which the letters are written, such as size, colour or watermarks. He does not preserve the lineation of the letters, creating paragraphs out of Byron's writing where the originals are more fluid in their use of line breaks. He converts underlining to italics and routinely omits erasures. He standardises all salutations, making them appear on the same line as the body of the letter and following the addressee's name with a dash, whatever Byron did in the original. Byron's punctuation is distinctive, and he used dashes of a variety of lengths and weights, sometimes in combinations of seven or eight dashes together; Marchand boils this range down to either a single or double dash in his edition.

Richard Lansdown's edition, by reprinting Marchand's text, repeats all these compromises and shortcomings. Where Marchand follows the

addressee's name with a dash, this edition follows it with a line break (and no dash). Where Marchand used a double en-dash, this edition uses a single em-dash. Where Marchand used double quotation marks, this edition uses single ones. These editorial decisions create a clean reading page with a consistent lay-out, but this kind of tidying-up reduces the distinctiveness, variety and sometimes idiosyncrasy of Byron's letter writing. Lansdown's edition introduces some additional tidying-up of its own: postscripts, for example, are separated from their letters by a printer's ornament and, for some reason, are printed in italics. I compared some letters with Marchand's text to check for variants, as well as with the fuller transcriptions available on Peter Cochran's website, and found some minor differences in capitalization and punctuation, as well as in the use of ampersands. There are also a few more substantial differences: for example, in an important letter from Byron to Lady Byron dated 5 February 1816, when their marriage was breaking down (p. 200 in Lansdown's edition; V, 23 in Marchand's), Lansdown omits the note on the letter's outer cover asking the servant who carried it to deliver it directly into Lady Byron's hands.

Perhaps these quibbles are just pedantic. After all, this is not intended as a scholarly edition of the complete letters, but as a selection for the general reader, designed to give them a flavor of Byron the letter-writer in about ten percent of his surviving letters. But the reader who wants a real flavor deserves accurate transcriptions of the letters that Byron actually wrote, including his distinctive use of punctuation, lineation and so on. By choosing to reprint Marchand, then, this edition misses an opportunity to represent Byron's letters more precisely than any previous edition.

Lansdown makes one significant textual intervention that seems more successful. He breaks up the 1813-14 journal so that the entries are interspersed chronologically with the letters written in the same period. The downside of this experiment is that we lose the sense of the journal as a discrete text with distinctive rhetorical strategies and self-fashioning poses. But distributing the journal entries among the letters does allow us to track Byron's state of mind in this period, which was one of both great public success and significant private dissatisfaction. Readers can see how differently Byron expressed himself to his correspondents and in the privacy of his journal without flipping the pages back and forth between the two.

Lansdown supplies new annotations for the letters, and they are extensive. While he obviously relies on Marchand for information, his footnotes are fewer in number (tending to gather up into one note details that Marchand spreads across several) and livelier in their style. When Byron tells Lady Byron 'I will buckler thee against a million', Marchand supplies the reference to *The Taming of the Shrew*, but Lansdown also notes that this was 'not the most diplomatic of Shakespeare's plays to allude to, under the circumstances' (p. 200). The notes supply many cross-references between letters and almost all the information that a reader coming to the letters for the first time would need. They also sometimes supply important information from letters that are not included in the present selection. In a few instances I looked for a note and found none. Writing to Lady Melbourne from Cheltenham in September 1812, Byron tells her

that '*they* are safely deposited in Ireland' (p. 106). *They* are Caroline Lamb and her mother, as Marchand tells us, but Lansdown leaves us to guess. Most of the time, however, the new notes are helpful and even entertaining.

There's also an introduction discussing the artistry of Byron's letters, and short biographical headnotes to each of the twelve chronological sections into which the edition is divided. The introduction claims that Byron's letters and journals add up to 'one of the three great informal autobiographies in English, alongside Samuel Pepys's diary and James Boswell's journal' (xi). This is the spirit in which this new selected edition presents the letters – as a witty, lively, sometimes racy commentary on a remarkable life, full of interest for a general reader. We can welcome the new edition for making the letters accessible, manageable and (more) affordable to a wider readership, even if we still wish for a newly-edited text that would represent Byron's epistolary achievement more accurately and fully.